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Study: Gun Storage Laws Are Ineffective and Associated with Increases in Violent Crime

While the Senate voted overwhelmingly last year (78-20; Roll Call Vote No. 122; 5/18/99) to require secure gun storage or safety devices be sold with every handgun, some Senators want to go farther by legislating how gun owners must store firearms in their own homes. A recent study indicates such laws — already enacted in many states — do not achieve their aims and may cause more harm than good.

Proponents claim “safe gun storage” laws prevent accidental gun deaths, particularly among children. Under the Children’s Gun Violence Prevention Act of 1999 (S. 735), sponsored by Senators Kennedy, Boxer, Durbin, and Schumer, parents would be required to keep all firearms — even those meant for home security — either locked up or unloaded with no ammunition nearby. If a child takes his parents’ gun without permission, both parents could be charged with a felony punishable by a \$10,000 fine and a year in prison. Introducing the bill, Senator Kennedy said, “The legislation we propose today is an important step in meeting our responsibility for the safety of children.”

However, a recently updated study by John R. Lott of Yale University and John E. Whitley of the University of Chicago suggests otherwise. Analyzing 20 years of state-by-state data, the authors “find no support that safe storage laws reduce either juvenile accidental gun deaths or suicides. Instead, these storage requirements appear to impair people’s ability to use guns defensively.” The authors also estimated the damage done by these laws:

During the first five full years after the passage of the safe storage laws, the group of fifteen states that adopted these laws faced an annual average increase of over 300 more murders, 3,860 more rapes, 24,650 more robberies, and over 25,000 more aggravated assaults. On average, the annual costs borne by victims averaged over \$2.6 billion as a result of lost productivity, out-of-pocket expenses, medical bills, and property losses.

The authors postulate that crime increases because the laws make it more difficult to use guns in the home for self-defense, and that criminals know this; meanwhile, accidental deaths remain unaffected because homes where those deaths occur are unlikely to obey the law to begin with.

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[Source: Lott and Whitley, “Safe Storage Gun Laws: Accidental Deaths, Suicides and Crime,” revised March 29, 2000; available at http://papers.ssrn.com/paper.taf?abstract_id=228534.]